

workers' liberty



# Marx's telescope

Marx's Grundrisse, capital  
and the revolutionary  
class – a briefing for  
anti-capitalists

# Marx's telescope

## By Martin Thomas

THE working class is the revolutionary class. It is the gravedigger of capitalism and the architect of socialism. Everyone who has even heard of Karl Marx knows that those were central ideas. But Marx himself, in old age, gave an eager suggestion from a young co-thinker about producing an edition of his collected works the wry response: "They would first have to be written".

Marx wrote a lot, but only a fraction of what he planned to write, and that fraction selected by haphazard circumstances as well as by deliberation. Thus, the *Communist Manifesto* opens with the sentence: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles"; but the one chapter where Marx set out to explain systematically what he meant by "class", chapter 52 of *Capital* volume 3, is an unfinished fragment of five paragraphs.

Likewise with the revolutionary role of the working class. The idea runs through all his writings, yet nowhere does he clear a space to set down his arguments in textbook form, step by step.

In textbook Marxism, therefore, it can be all too easy to divide the perspective into two separate propositions:

1. Capitalism will break down (because of economic contradictions);

2. Someone (probably the working class) will take over and concentrate the means of production into a single hand.

The "someone", in this scheme, needs no prior preparation except to be around, and available as a cohesive force, when capitalism collapses.

Stalinism could present itself as "Marxist" by hammering at proposition one, and quietly, under cover of the noisy banging, amend proposition two to "someone, in the name of the working class, will take over..."

In recovering the real gist of Marx's thought, evaluating its relevance to capital today, and working out a sound long-term perspective in the 21st century, one of Marx's major but least-known writings is central.

That is the *Grundrisse*, Marx's "Rough Draft" of 1857-8. The *Grundrisse*, some 779 pages in the English translation, comprises seven notebooks written by Marx in the winter of 1857-8 in a dash (so he hoped) to get his "Economics" finished.

In September 1850 Marx had broken with the majority of the Communist League exiles in London, with these words:

*We tell the workers: If you want to change conditions and make yourselves capable of government, you will have to undergo fifteen, twenty or fifty years of civil war.*

*Now they are told [by the majority]: We must come to power immediately or we might as well go to sleep. The word proletariat has been reduced to a mere phrase, like the word 'people' was by the democrats.*

*To make this phrase a reality one would have to declare the entire petty bourgeois to be proletarians, i.e. de facto represent the petty bourgeoisie and not the proletariat. In place of actual revolutionary development one would have to adopt the revolutionary phrase.*

In other words, only by a lengthy development within capitalist society (by civil war, Marx evidently means social war, rather than necessarily military battle), does the working class become the revolutionary working class. To adopt the "revolutionary phrase", that is, to pretend that the working class is always immediately revolutionary, is to fall into a politics of pretences. You end up recommending whatever (petty-bourgeois) oppositional movements are immediately to hand, and glossing them up as proletarian, rather than cleaving to the long-term interests of the working class.

Around the same time Marx wrote:

*While this general prosperity lasts, enabling the productive forces of bourgeois society to develop to the full extent possible within the bourgeois system, there can be no question of a real revolution. Such a revolution is only possible at a time when two factors come into conflict: the modern productive forces and the bourgeois forms of production... A new revolution is only possible as a result of a new crisis; but it will come, just as surely as the crisis itself.*

In 1857 crisis erupted. Marx feverishly set to work to pull together his long-languishing economic studies. "I am working like mad all night and every night collating my economic studies so that I at least get the outlines clear before the deluge", he wrote to Engels (8 December 1857).

By February 1858, he was writing to Ferdinand Lassalle: "I would like to tell you how thing stand with my work on economics. For the last few months I have in fact been working on the final version".

Final it wasn't. But by June 1858 Marx had completed a manuscript which covered, in outline, much of the terrain to be covered by the three volumes of *Capital* and the three volumes of *Theories of Surplus Value*; and, what interests us most here, a great deal besides.

## Brewing subversion

THE writing was spurred on by the idea that revolution was the more-or-less mechanical product of crisis. But Marx must have soon realised that this crisis would not

evoke revolution. In fact, the *Grundrisse* is a big step in Marx's path from the idea that revolution is a product of crisis towards his later view that revolution is brewed up in the whole course of capitalist development itself, rather than primarily in the mechanical blockages and reversals of that development (i.e. crises).

More than in any of his other works, in the *Grundrisse* Marx sometimes lays aside the microscope with which he analyses current economic and political intricacies, and takes up a telescope to look at the very long-term trends of capitalist development.

What does that telescope see as the traits of fully-developed capitalist society?

In the first place, the commodification of everything, and extensive privatisation of public utilities.

Since Engels in *Anti-Dühring* (the manuscript of which Marx read and approved), Marxists have seen the concentration and centralisation of capital as moving logically to a "highest stage" of the withering of capitalist competition and the grouping of production in the hands of states or of large private capitalist enterprises more or less monopolising their national markets. And up to the 1970s, things went pretty much that way.

Now they are obviously different. *Capital* continues to "concentrate and centralise", as Marx put it in chapter 25 of *Capital*. But Marx developed that argument "within a given [national] society". That is more or less how it went until nearly 100 years after his death.

To this day, most multinational corporations still have a definite "homeland". But on a world scale their growth comes with an intensification of capitalist competition, and a cutback in the direct economic enterprise of individual states.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx, more prescient than perhaps he knew, foreshadowed this development:

*All general conditions of production, such as roads, canals, etc... presuppose, in order to be undertaken by capital instead of by the government which represents the community as such, the highest development of production founded on capital. The separation of public works from the state, and their migration into the domain of the works undertaken by capital itself, indicates the degree to which the real community has constituted itself in the form of capital... [p.531].*

## Real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time

*The highest development of capital exists when the general conditions of the process of social production are not paid out of deductions from the social revenue, the state's taxes — where revenue and not capital appears as the labour fund, and where the worker, although he is a free wage worker like any other, nevertheless stands economically in a different relation — but rather out of capital as capital. This shows the degree to which capital has subjugated all conditions of social production to itself, on one side; and, on the other side, hence, the extent to which social reproductive wealth has been capitalised, and all needs are satisfied through the exchange form; as well as the extent to which the socially posited needs of the individual, i.e. those which he consumes and feels not as a single individual in society, but communally with others — whose mode of consumption is social by the nature of the thing — are likewise not only consumed but also produced through exchange, individual exchange. [p.532]*

"The invading socialist society" within capitalist forms is thus not, as Engels suggested, the "planned production" of monopolistic associations of private producers, or directly of the capitalist state, in national frameworks.

What are the subversive elements in this advanced capitalist society viewed through Marx's telescope?

Capitalism so advanced rarely has women and men as the direct agents of production. Instead the workers tend, supervise, and maintain a process of production driven by science.

*The great historic quality of capital is to create this surplus labour, superfluous labour from the standpoint of mere use value, mere subsistence; and its historic destiny [Bestimmung] is fulfilled as soon as...*

*on one side, there has been such a development of needs that surplus labour above and beyond necessity has itself become a general need arising out of individual needs themselves...*

*and, on the other side, when the severe discipline of capital, acting on succeeding generations [Geschlechter], has developed general industriousness as the general property of the new species [Geschlecht]...*

*and, finally, when the development of the productive powers of labour, which capital incessantly whips onward with its*

*unlimited mania for wealth, and of the sole conditions in which this mania can be realised, have flourished to the stage where the possession and preservation of general wealth require a lesser labour time of society as a whole, and where the labouring society relates scientifically to the process of its progressive reproduction, its reproduction in a constantly greater abundance; hence...*

*where labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased...*

*Natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one. That is why capital is productive; i.e. an essential relation for the development of the social productive forces. [p.325]*

## General intellect

CAPITALIST wealth depends on the capitalist squeezing more labour out of the worker than the equivalent of what he has paid for the labour-power; on "the theft of alien labour".

As science and technology advance, it becomes plain to all that this squeezing of wealth for a few from the misery of the many can be replaced by wealth for all by the achievement of collective control over "the general intellect".

Aspiration to that collective control is built into the development which capital spurs on within the working class itself. For capital cannot develop its productive powers, cannot sell the new products which new powers make possible, without constantly requiring greater general knowledge, and expanding the horizon of needs and wants, among the workers (at the same time as it curtails that knowledge, and frustrates those wants and needs).

*While... individual labour as such has ceased altogether to appear as productive, is productive, rather, only in these common labours which subordinate the forces of nature to themselves, and while this elevation of direct labour into social labour appears as a reduction of individual labour to the level of helplessness in face of the communality [Gemeinsamkeit] represented by and concentrated in capital... Thus all powers of labour are transposed into powers of capital...*

*Through this process, the amount of labour necessary for the production of a given object is indeed reduced to a minimum, but only in order to realise a maximum of labour in the maximum number of such objects. The first aspect is important, because capital here — quite unintentionally — reduces human labour, expenditure of energy, to a minimum. This will redound to the benefit of emancipated labour, and is the condition of its emancipation...*

*To the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose 'powerful effectiveness' is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production...*

*Real wealth manifests itself, rather — and large industry reveals this — in the monstrous disproportion between the labour time applied, and its product, as well as in the qualitative imbalance between labour, reduced to a pure abstraction, and the power of the production process it superintends. Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself... He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor.*

*In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body — it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth.*

*The theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself.*

*As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the non-labour of the few, for the development of the general powers of the human head. With that, production based on exchange value breaks down... The free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them...*

*Forces of production and social relations — two different sides of the development of the social individual — appear to capital as mere means, and are merely means for it to produce on its limited foundation. In fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high...*

*The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree*

general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process...

The development of fixed capital indicates in still another respect the degree of development of wealth generally, or of capital...

The mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour. Once they have done so — and disposable time thereby ceases to have an antithetical existence — then, on one side, necessary labour time will be measured by the needs of the social individual, and, on the other, the development of the power of social production will grow so rapidly that, even though production is now calculated for the wealth of all, disposable time will grow for all. For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time.

Labour time as the measure of value posits wealth itself as founded on poverty, and disposable time as existing in and because of the antithesis to surplus labour time; or, the positing of an individual's entire time as labour time, and his degradation therefore to mere worker, subsumption under labour...

As the basis on which large industry rests, the appropriation of alien labour time, ceases, with its development, to make up or to create wealth, so does direct labour as such cease to be the basis of production, since, in one respect, it is transformed more into a supervisory and regulatory activity; but then also because the product ceases to be the product of isolated direct labour, and the combination of social activity appears, rather, as the producer... in the production process of large-scale industry... [p.700ff]

Here Marx describes to us a working class which becomes revolutionary because:

Capital's ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth drives labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness [Naturbedürftigkeit], and thus creates the material elements for the development of the rich individuality... [p.325] which cannot but collide with the barriers of capital.

### “Civilising influence” of capital

In the first text in which he identified the working class as the agency of socialist revolution, his *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844), Marx put it like this:

Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation?

Answer: In the formulation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong, but wrong generally, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no historical, but only human, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat.

The working class is able to create a new, more human, society... because it has been dehumanised and brutalised, “is the complete loss of man”. There is nothing but dialectical flourish to explain this postulated transition.

This exposition takes us no further than the hopeful but

Working-class organisation in economic struggles — half a million French trade unionists defend young workers' rights, CPE law demonstration, Paris, March 2006

puzzled comments by Engels in a letter to Marx of October 1844:

As it is, the workers had already reached the final stage of the old civilisation a few years ago, and the rapid increase in crime, robbery and murder is their way of protesting against the old social organisation. At night the streets are very unsafe, the bourgeoisie is beaten, stabbed and robbed; and, if the proletarians here develop according to the same laws as in

## Developed capitalist production, precisely because of its drive to extract and realise surplus value, has no choice but to... create a workforce of varied and wide potentialities, and also to create new aspirations and needs among the working class

England, they will soon realise that this way of protesting as individuals and with violence against the social order is useless, and they will protest, through communism, in their general capacity as human beings. If only one could show these fellows the way! But that's impossible.

In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx has moved

forward. Building on the prefigurations of “the brotherhood of man” which he has seen in his association with organised French socialist workers in Paris in 1844, and on the understanding of the importance of trade-union struggles which he has developed from studying the English experience and in his polemic against Proudhon (1846), he adduces positive properties of the working class itself — its self-organisation in economic struggles, its building of links using modern communications, its learning about political action thanks to the bourgeoisie being compelled to draw it into that function — rather than simply postulating it as the negation of capitalist society.

He also distinguishes between the working class, as a revolutionary force, and those who are most brutalised and dehumanised by capitalism, the lumpenproletariat, whom he considers more likely to be reactionary.

Even in the *Communist Manifesto*, though, Marx has not emancipated himself from the old “iron law of wages” (the idea, commonplace among socialists at the time, that capitalism necessarily limited wages to physical-subsistence level), and so there are still large elements of his view of the working class as the epitome of brutalisation and dehumanisation.

It is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. Hence, the cost of production of a workman is restricted, almost entirely, to the means of subsistence that he requires for maintenance, and for the propagation of his race. But the price of a commodity, and therefore also of labour, is equal to its cost of production. In proportion, therefore, as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases....

In the *Grundrisse* (and later, in chapter 15 of *Capital*), Marx argues differently. Developed capitalist production, precisely because of its drive to extract and realise surplus value, has no choice but to “drive labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness”, to replace “labour in which a human being does what a thing could do”, to create a workforce of varied and wide potentialities, and also to create new aspirations and needs among the working class.

A precondition of production based on capital is therefore the production of a constantly widening sphere of circulation, whether the sphere itself is directly expanded or whether more points within it are created as points of production. While circulation appeared at first as a constant magnitude, it here appears as a moving magnitude, being expanded by production itself...

The tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself....

The production of relative surplus value, i.e. production of surplus value based on the increase and development of the productive forces, requires the production of new consumption... creation of new needs by propagating existing ones in a wide circle... production of new needs and discovery and creation of new use values....

[Thus] the cultivation of all the qualities of the social human being, production of the same in a form as rich as possible in needs, because rich in qualities and relations — production of this being as the most total and universal possible social product, for, in order to take gratification in a many-sided way, he must be capable of many pleasures [genussfähig], hence cultured to a high degree — is likewise a condition of production founded on capital....

Just as production founded on capital creates universal industriousness on one side... so does it create on the other side a system of general exploitation of the natural and human qualities... while there appears nothing higher in itself, nothing legitimate for itself, outside this circle of social production and

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exchange...

Hence the great civilising influence of capital; its production of a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere local developments of humanity and as nature-idolatory...

Capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionises it... [p.409-10]

## Development through contradiction

TOO often among Marxists, this thought has been dismissed as relevant only to “when the bourgeoisie was a progressive class”. We are told that since some time around World War One capitalism has been in its “epoch of decay”, and so all it does is reactionary.

At best this argument is a stretching — to breaking point and beyond — of an assessment by Marxists like Lenin and Trotsky of actual capitalist decay in the period after World War One. They worked to have that decay replaced by workers’ power. They were defeated. It was replaced by a self-restructuring of capital, at workers’ expense, which eventually created the terms for a new capitalist expansion.

At worst it becomes sheer superstition and romanticisation of the bourgeoisie of days gone by. So the “financial aristocracy” which ruled France at the time Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto, which Marx called “the lumpenproletariat reborn at the pinnacle of bourgeois society”, could work a “civilising influence of capital”? Or the “gang of shady characters” which succeeded it to rule between 1851 and 1870? Or the Gradgrinds and Bounderbs of mid-19th century Britain? Those who, as Marx put it, had enslaved the workers to no more impressive purpose than “to transform a few vulgar and half-educated upstarts into ‘eminent cotton-spinners’, ‘extensive sausage makers’ and ‘influential blacking dealers’.” They were not so bad? They were “progressive bourgeois”? But the bourgeois of today, who in their own interests and in their own way have set up the Internet and mass higher education? They, in contrast, have provided no elements on which the working class can seize as levers for emancipation?

Marx refers, startlingly but emphatically, to the “civilising influence of capital” on the working class.

Read thoroughly, and it is clear that Marx is very far from “the ‘socialist’ professors” whom Rosa Luxemburg derided as: *acclaim[ing] the wearing of neckties, the use of visiting cards, and the riding of bicycles by proletarians as notable instances of participation in cultural progress.*

Whatever the arguments about Hegel, it is clear that Marx’s telescope sees development as proceeding through contradictions.

Marx is clear that the “positive aspects” of capitalist development are inextricably intertwined with — really, are the same thing as — the “negative aspects”. They are the same process looked at from a different angle. And they are “positive” not because they make capitalism not so bad after all, but because they create within capitalism an immense potential for abolishing and going beyond capitalism.

It is precisely the drive to exploit — to extract more and more surplus-labour and then to “realise” it (by selling the products) — that drives the “civilising influence”. And the “civilising influence” becomes manifest through the workers’ fight back against that drive to extract surplus labour, and the organisation and self-education built on it.

*The semblance of exchange [between workers and capital] vanishes in the course [Process] of the mode of production founded on capital. This course itself and its repetition posit what is the case in itself, namely that the worker receives as wages from the capitalist what is only a part of his own labour. This then also enters into the consciousness of the workers as well as of the capitalists. [p.597].*

This development-through-contradiction, for Marx, breeds a drive by the working class to press on through the contradictions and to go beyond them by seizing collective control of production.

Marx did not attempt to carry this argument through in full detail in *Capital*. A pungent condensation of it is however there, in passages little-noticed in summaries of *Capital* but nonetheless central to the book’s argument about the revolutionary role of the working class and specifically of the working class in the most advanced capitalist industry.

*Modern Industry never looks upon and treats the existing form of a process as final. The technical basis of that industry is therefore revolutionary, while all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative... It is continually causing changes not only in the technical basis of production, but also in the functions of the labourer, and in the social combinations of the labour-process. At the same time, it thereby also revolutionises the division of labour within the society, and incessantly launches masses of capital and of workpeople from one branch of production to another. But if Modern Industry, by its very nature, therefore necessitates variation of labour, fluency of function, universal mobility of the labourer, on the other hand, in its capitalistic form, it reproduces the old division of labour with its ossified particularisations... This absolute contradiction between the technical necessities of Modern Industry, and the social character inherent in its capitalistic form, dispels all fixity and security in the situation of the labourer... Variation of work at present imposes itself after the manner of an overpowering natural law, and with the blindly destructive action of a natural law that meets with resistance at all points, [but] Modern Industry, on the other hand, through its catastrophes imposes the necessity of recognising,*

*as a fundamental law of production, variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourer for varied work, consequently the greatest possible development of his varied aptitudes...*

*By maturing the material conditions, and the combination on a social scale of the processes of production, it matures the contradictions and antagonisms of the capitalist form of production, and thereby provides, along with the elements for the formation of a new society, the forces for exploding the old one [Chapter 15, section 9]*

As a footnote, to give individual illustration to his argument about the subversive potential of advanced industry’s inherent fluidity, Marx cites the testimony of a French worker who spent time in California:

*I never could have believed, that I was capable of working at the various occupations I was employed on in California. I was firmly convinced that I was fit for nothing but letter-press printing... Once in the midst of this world of adventurers, who change their occupation as often as they do their shirt, egad, I did as the others. As mining did not turn out remunerative enough, I left it for the town, where in succession I became typographer, slater, plumber, &c. In consequence of thus finding out that I am fit to any sort of work, I feel less of a mollusk and more of a man.*

## “Up to its blessed end”

THERE is nothing in the *Grundrisse* about trade-union struggles, organisation, utilisation of the political arenas of bourgeois democracy, i.e. the specific forms through which Marx saw workers collectively becoming “less of molluscs, more of humans”, and indeed more than just the dialectical obverse of capital, more than just the poverty accompanying capitalist wealth. For that we need to read *The Poverty of Philosophy, Wages Price and Profit*, and Marx’s writings for the First International.

But there are two things in the *Grundrisse*, very important for our times, which is not in those better-known articles and pamphlets.

## Marx is clear that the “positive aspects” of capitalist development are inextricably intertwined with — really, are the same thing as — the “negative aspects” ...

Contrary to what became the assumption — reasonable on the face of it — of most Marxists in the era after Marx’s death, Marx here suggests that every building-up of the labour movement, until our final victory, must be only provisional and temporary, subject to be undermined by the constant whirl of capitalist restructuring. The movement will then need to be built up again, with a changed, more developed, more “individualistic” working class.

Marx takes the emergence of “labour in general”, as distinct from a segregation of the population into traditional trades and callings, as characteristic of developed capitalist society, and as existing empirically “as its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society — the United States”.

This is not “labour in general” established by the fact that everyone does much the same sort of labour. On the contrary, “Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant” [p.104].

As capital develops, therefore, labour becomes every more differentiated and ever more fluid. Every form of labour organisation built up on fixed communities or trades is, in time, dissolved, the movement has to rebuild itself on the basis of an even richer, more diverse, “totality of real kinds of labour”.

The response is never automatic; the process is never linear. According to Marx in the *Grundrisse*, capital’s constant process of expanding human potentialities and simultaneously making human society more “empty” will always generate more than one response. The revolutionary communist response is to push forward, on through the whirl and out the other side, to emancipation. But, Marx insists, the “reactionary anti-capitalist response” will be there too, always, “to the blessed end”.

*Universally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal [gemeinschaftlich] relations, are hence also subordinated to their own communal control, are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where this individuality becomes possible supposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities.*

*The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where this individuality becomes possible supposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities. In earlier stages of development the single individual seems to be developed more fully, because he has not yet worked out his relationships in their fullness, or erected them as independent social powers and relations opposite himself.*

*It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end. [p.162] Und darum wird jene als berechtigter Gegensatz sie bis an ihr seliges Ende begleiten.*

Marx holds that “the old view” which “appears very lofty” is actually much more limited; that the break-up of pre-capitalist communal relationships is in fact a precondition of emancipation.

*The reproduction of presupposed relations... of the individual to his commune, together with a specific, objective existence, predetermined for the individual, of his relations both to the conditions of labour and to his co-workers, fellow tribesmen etc. — are the foundation of development, which is therefore from the outset restricted...*

*Great developments can take place here within a specific sphere. The individuals may appear great. But there can be no conception here of a free and full development either of the individual or of the society, since such development stands in contradiction to the original relation.*

*Do we never find in antiquity an inquiry into which form of landed property etc. is the most productive, creates the greatest wealth? Wealth does not appear as the aim of production, although Cato may well investigate which manner of cultivating a field brings the greatest rewards, and Brutus may even lend out his money at the best rates of interest. The question is always which mode of property creates the best citizens. Wealth appears as an end in itself only among the few commercial peoples — monopolists of the carrying trade — who live in the pores of the ancient world, like the Jews in medieval society...*

*Thus the old view, in which the human being appears as the aim of production, regardless of his limited national, religious, political character, seems to be very lofty when contrasted to the modern world, where production appears as the aim of mankind and wealth as the aim of production.*

*In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human nature over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity’s own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a predetermined yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?*

*In bourgeois economics — and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds — this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end. But why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as loftier... [p.487-8].*

In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels started their definition of what was specific to their socialist or communist politics by denouncing “reactionary socialism”. Their denunciation of those reactionary anti-capitalists was more absolute than their damning of the bourgeoisie itself.

Marx and Engels set their aim as “the Communistic abolition of buying and selling, of the bourgeois conditions of production, and of the bourgeoisie itself”. And the way towards that? Ruthless class struggle by the workers against that bourgeoisie.

But they also credited the bourgeoisie with installing massive forces of production; opening out communications; creating “a world literature” in place of old “narrow-mindedness”; “supplying the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education” in the battles of bourgeois democracy; and, by prompting the defection of a section of bourgeois intellectuals to the side of the working class, “supplying the proletariat with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress”.

For the reactionary socialists — feudal socialists, Christian socialists, “petty-bourgeois socialism” (“corporate guilds for manufacture; patriarchal relations in agriculture”); the “true socialism” of “sickly sentiment” — they saw no such other side of the story.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, however, those species of “reactionary socialism” are depicted as social and political remnants, about to disappear.

Marx and Engels were vehement against what they saw as tendencies in the early German workers’ movement to dally with the idea of “socialistic” measures to be achieved in alliance with the landlord class or the state bureaucracy against the bourgeoisie. But in their later writings, on the whole, the idea of a two-front fight against capital and against reactionary anti-capitalist forces tends to fade away.

Something like the old idea can be found in such writings as the pioneer Russian Marxist George Plekhanov’s *Our Differences*, where he warns that if an anti-capitalist revolution through coup d’état by the populists (the dominant radical force in Russia at the time) were possible, it would “lead to a political monster similar to the ancient Chinese or Peruvian empires, i.e. to a renewal of tsarist despotism with a communist lining”.

On the whole, however, the idea faded away in the Marxism of the era before World War One.

The labour movements were getting stronger, and moving towards modern socialist ideas. Aside from what could reason-

in a foreign country. The concentration of capital within a country and the dissolving effect of this concentration present nothing but positive sides to him. But the monopoly of concentrated English capital and its dissolving effect on the smaller national capitals of other countries is disharmonious.

What Carey has not grasped is that these world-market disharmonies are merely the ultimate adequate expressions of the disharmonies which have become fixed as abstract relations within the economic categories or which have a local existence on the smallest scale. No wonder, then, that he in turn forgets the positive content of these processes of dissolution... when he comes to their full appearance, the world market. Hence, where the economic relations confront him in their truth, i.e. in their universal reality, his principled optimism turns into a denunciatory, irritated pessimism.

Referring to the maverick English writer David Urquhart, who was a fanatical "conspiracy theorist" seeing the intervention of Tsarist Russia as responsible for the world's every evil, Marx wrote:

*What Russia is, politically, for Urquhart, England is, economically, for Carey...*

And so today, the USA is, politically and economically, for the "Yankophobe" left.

Stalinism was the 20th century's dominant form of "reactionary anti-capitalism", and the one that set the terms for today's "Yankophobe" left. Today many leftists whose minds are dominated by the left-overs of Stalinism (though they sincerely reckon themselves anti-Stalinist) have their politics shaped by the desire to see in political Islam a "filler" for the "revolutionary phrase" they adopt in place of "actual revolutionary development". Or, in a simpler form of "reactionary anti-capitalism", they lapse into looking for "liberated spaces" and "counter-powers" in little communities, as if those little communities could prevail against what Marx identified as "the real community" in bourgeois society, namely capital.

One way or another, though, we will have to fight reactionary anti-capitalism "to the blessed end".

The *Grundrisse* steers us away from the increasingly-desperate "crude-Marxist" idea that revolutionary working-class consciousness can come only from the economic dissatisfaction consequent upon economic crisis, but at least (in return) is pretty certain to come, Pavlov-dog fashion, in response to that crisis. It points us instead to the task of constantly rebuilding and re-educating the labour movement within the processes of capitalist development. It orients us to a fight on two fronts against capital and against reactionary anti-capitalism.

## Consumerism

It also raises at least two big questions requiring new thought by Marxists in the light of today's conditions. First, consumerism. Marx is unambiguous about seeing capitalist consumerism as a constructive force, widening workers' horizons, expanding their needs.

## Every building-up of the labour movement, until our final victory, must be only provisional and temporary, subject to be undermined by the constant whirl of capitalist restructuring.

Can that still be true today? Isn't the desire for the new Play Station, the four-wheel drive, and the monster fridge-freezer, on the contrary, a stultifying factor?

Isn't there a natural limit? Research by economists, tricky by the very nature of the subject but still impressive in the accumulation of similar results from diverse investigations, suggests that people are happier with more possessions only up to a certain point.

Above quite a low level, people are made unhappy by inequality more than by low absolute level of income; so, for sure, someone living in Britain today on an average wage from the 1950s would be unhappy because relatively poor.

And it does not follow that the most modern gadgets are of the least human value; plenty of people might prefer to do without that relatively "old" invention, the car, rather than, say, a computer or a mobile phone.

But, somewhere about the level reached by averagely well-off workers in better-off countries between the 1950s and the 1970s, there is a cut-off. Up to that point, more "stuff" pretty much uniformly makes people happier; after that, not.

In fact, doesn't there have to be a limit of some sort for the Marxist perspective of a communism of "general abundance" to be possible? If when everyone has all the basics, people are still trying to elbow each other into the gutter to get shinier or newer stuff, and need to be policed either by the market or (probably more harmfully) by a "gendarme on the BMW queue", then we may be able to create a somewhat more humane and equal society, but we can never reach anything like what Marx foresaw as communism.

In any case, nature imposes limits. If everyone in the world wanted to live in the style of the middle class in California, they could not. The drain on, and the damage to, the resources of the planet would be unsustainable.

In that situation, doesn't capitalist consumerism become a

*Hizbullah — reactionary anti-capitalism*

ably be dismissed as freakish episodes, like the proto-fascist agitation of General Boulanger in France in 1887-9, bourgeois society moved slowly but unmistakably towards more bourgeois democracy. No-one imagined such things as fascism and Stalinism.

Actually, all that was a lull. Boulanger was not a freak, but a prefiguration of politics that would dominate much of 20th century history — of reactionary attempts to counterpose an imaginary social "fullness" to the way capital inexorably creates human "emptiness" in bourgeois society.

The reactionary anti-capitalist response does indeed accompany bourgeois society "to the blessed end". Contrary to crude interpretations of Marx, and in line with Marx's own predictions in *Theories of Surplus Value*, the "middle classes" — among sections of whom that reactionary anti-capitalist response can find its first natural base (though from there it can spread, and has sometimes spread, to large working-class audiences) — remain large even in the most advanced capitalism.

## Urquhart's Russia, Carey's England

The "reactionary anti-capitalist" response can be "modernised". In the *Grundrisse*, Marx dissected such a "modernised" response in the writings of the American economist Henry Carey, contrasting him with the French writer Frederic Bastiat.

Bastiat was a neo-liberal before his time. His response to the French socialists was that all the defects they complained of in French society were simply due to the capital not being fully enough developed in France. "The task is to free bourgeois society from the fetters which the state imposes on it. You want to multiply those fetters. First work out the bourgeois relations in their pure form, and then we may talk again".

Marx, of course, had no time for Bastiat, and reckoned that as against Bastiat, Carey was "rich in, so to speak, bona fide

research in economic science".

But Carey had the characteristic "reactionary anti-capitalist" trait of counterposing an idealised version of supposedly more harmonious earlier development to the stresses and contradictions of contemporary capitalism.

Carey was by no means an "absolute anti-capitalist". Nor in fact are most "reactionary anti-capitalists". Paradoxically, among the reactionary anti-capitalists, the most reactionary are the most anti-capitalist, those who are most absolute in their anti-capitalism. If the artificial harmonious ideal which they counterpose to the capitalist whirl of today is thoroughly non-capitalist, then it has to presuppose the crushing into invisibility of that characteristic product of capitalist society, the working class. There are plenty of milder "reactionary anti-capitalists".

Carey was Abraham Lincoln's chief economic adviser. He argued that capitalist development could be harmonious in the USA — if only it shut out the disturbing influence of more developed English capital.

*With Carey the harmony of the bourgeois relations of production ends with the most complete disharmony of these relations on the grandest terrain where they appear, the world market, and in their grandest development, as the relations of producing nations. All the relations which appear harmonious to him within specific national boundaries or, in addition, in the abstract form of general relations of bourgeois society -- e.g. concentration of capital, division of labour, wage labour etc. -- appear as disharmonious to him where they appear in their most developed form -- in their world market form -- as the internal relations which produce English domination on the world market, and which, as destructive influences, are the consequence of this domination. If patriarchal gives way to industrial production within a country, this is harmonious, and the process of dissolution which accompanies this development is conceived in its positive aspect alone. But it becomes disharmonious when large-scale English industry dissolves the patriarchal or petty-bourgeois or other lower stages of production*

retrogressive factor, a factor making the working class less and not more subversive?

There is force to these arguments. But they can mislead the left into a hopeless dead-end, indeed another variant of reactionary anti-capitalism. Our polemical edge has to be directed against the hypertrophy of capitalist advertising and the relentless search for the easy quick buck in capitalist cultural production, not against the workers who like MTV or take too many cheap flights.

A relatively harmless, but comic, example of the snares is an article from 1986 by Ernest Mandel, attempting to answer a critic who said that the Marxist vision was impossible because, however prosperous, people would always want more stuff.

Mandel had to suggest that there were some consumer goods which people would really not mind doing without. Casting around for an example, he picked on the video cassette recorder, then an expensive new luxury.

"Might it not be preferable to forego the Betamax [i.e. VCR], and to work ten hours fewer a week, with much less stress — if the satisfaction of all primary needs were not endangered by such a reduction?" (*New Left Review* I/159, September-October 1986).

Today, it is not just that almost all working-class people in prosperous countries have VCRs or DVD players. In Kabul under the Taliban, one of the things that people would risk terrible reprisals for was to gather in cellars and watch videotapes of the film *Titanic* on VCRs and TVs carefully hidden from the religious police.

It would not go down well to tell the working class, even in poorer countries, that communism will be good, but VCRs and DVD players will be unavailable.

A bigger example is the whole history of twentieth-century housing. Shuffle off much of the blame though we can onto capitalist governments like the British Tories of 1950s and 1960s who implemented programmes on the cheap and with the profits of the building contractors mainly in mind, the template for mass worker housing in the 20th century was set, and calamitously so, by thinkers of the left.

No, they believed, workers were not consumerist. They would not want suburban villas like the middle class. They would want sparsely-designed, "functional", compulsorily-communal, and (supposedly) economical housing in huge blocks of flats.

The debacle of this vision has enabled writers of the right (Tom Wolfe in *From Bauhaus To Our House*, and Alice Coleman in *Utopia On Trial*) and of the centre (Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and elsewhere) to throw real discredit on the left. It also helped lay the basis for the sell-off of council houses to become Thatcher's most popular policy, and to be followed under Blair by a government drive to abolish council housing altogether.

Let us consider what Marx meant when he praised capitalist consumerism.

*[The worker] becomes co-participant in general wealth up to the limit of his equivalent — a quantitative limit which, of course, turns into a qualitative one, as in every exchange. But he is neither bound to particular objects, nor to a particular manner of satisfaction. The sphere of his consumption is not qualitatively restricted, only quantitatively. This distinguishes him from the slave, serf etc... [This] gives [workers] as*

## The revolutionary "negation" is the expansion above all of cultural, educated, social human freedom

*consumers... an entirely different importance as agents of production from that which they possessed e.g. in antiquity or in the Middle Ages, or now possess in Asia. [p.283].*

*Moreover, the semblance [of equality in the exchange] exists, nevertheless, as an illusion on his [the worker's] part and to a certain degree on the other side, and thus essentially modifies his relation by comparison to that of workers in other social modes of production. [p.284].*

*Capitalists demand that their workers scrimp and save. But this can be done effectively only by exceptional individual workers. If the working class as a whole were to follow the advice of the bourgeois preachers of thrift, it would lead to "brutalisation", the level of wage labour where the most animal minimum of needs and subsistence appears to [the worker] as the sole object and purpose of his exchange with capital [p.285].*

*The worker's participation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the agitation for his own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures, educating his children, developing his taste etc., his only share of civilisation which distinguishes him from the slave, is economically only possible by widening the sphere of his pleasures at the times when business is good, where saving is to a certain degree possible... Moreover, the capitalist simultaneously encourages other workers (not his own employees) to consume, to spend. In spite of all "pious" speeches he therefore searches for means to spur them on to consumption, to give his wares new charms, to inspire them with new needs by constant chatter etc. It is precisely this side of the relation of capital and labour which is an essential civilising moment, and on which the historic justification, but also the contemporary power of capital rests. [p.287]*

Marx would have known very well that the workers who used all their little discretionary income to read newspapers

and books, attend lectures and political or trade-union meetings, visit art galleries, and so on were the minority. So even were those who used it for other "cultural" activities such as the more varied forms of religious service newly available, or sports. The typical new goods of mass consumption at the time were tea, spirits, opium, sugar, processed foods, and mass entertainment of a sort which the worst efforts of modern commercial TV would find it hard to match for coarseness and degradation.

Public executions were still a major form of mass entertainment in England until they were ended as late as 1868. The newer forms of mass entertainment, available in the most prosperous countries, were epitomised by P.T. Barnum.

Barnum began his career as a showman in 1835 with his purchase and exhibition of a blind and almost completely paralysed African-American slave woman, Joice Heth, claimed by Barnum to have been the nurse of George Washington, and to be over a hundred and sixty years old.

He then ran a museum in New York, where he made a special hit in 1842 with the exhibition of Charles Stratton, the celebrated midget "General Tom Thumb" and the Fiji Mermaid. His collection also included the original Siamese twins, Chang and Eng Bunker.

After a temporary retirement, and a couple of failures, he opened his last enterprise in 1871 — P.T. Barnum's Grand Travelling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome, a travelling amalgamation of circus, menagerie and museum of "freaks".

Marx knew that capitalism intertwines its expansion of culture with an inculcation of "stupidity", which includes driving us towards trying to satisfy all needs with ever-more private possessions. *Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it — when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., — in short, when it is used by us.* [1844 Manuscripts, section on "Private Property and Communism"].

Simultaneously with the "civilising influence", inculcation of stupidity; simultaneously with inculcation of stupidity, capitalism's creation of a system of "artificial" needs, i.e. of culture, with great subversive and creative potential. The emancipation of culture from that "stupidity" can come only through human activity pushing through and beyond capitalist consumerism, not by an attempt to back out of it into an earlier, simpler era.

*Crude communism... how little this annulment of private property is really an appropriation is in fact proved by the abstract negation of the entire world of culture and civilisation, the regression to the unnatural simplicity of the poor and crude man who has few needs and who has not only failed to go beyond private property, but has not yet even reached it. The community is only a community of labour, and equality of wages paid out by communal capital — by the community as the universal capitalist. Both sides of the relationship are raised to an imagined universality — labour as the category in which every person is placed, and capital as the acknowledged universality and power of the community. [1844 MS, ibid].*

## Education

PART of the answer to the dilemmas around consumerism may lie in discussion of another big issue: education. One of the driving forces behind the pathological features of capitalist consumerism is, after all, a hopeless race to fill the "emptiness" which Marx identified as endemic to bourgeois society. Really to fill that "emptiness" requires the recreation of human solidarity in place of the atomisation and competitiveness of bourgeois society; and, unless that is to be an enterprise in regression towards the stultifying, horizon-narrowing, conformist communities of all pre-capitalist class societies, a vast expansion of education and culture.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes sweepingly of "the general intellect". But who is "the general"?

It is not the bourgeoisie. One of the things most manifest in our times, when eminent capitalists move from the top of one company to the top of another with lavish "golden hellos" and "golden farewells" but no-one suggesting that they need know anything about the different technologies employed in the different industries, is that capitalist success is essentially measured by the ability to do down workers and other capitalists, not by intellect.

The "engineer, technologist, etc." is, as Marx put it in *Capital*, "a limb of the aggregate worker at a greater distance from the actual manual labour".

But also, often, from the mass of the workers. If Marx is right about the "general intellect" becoming a greater and greater productive force, then working-class emancipation involves the collective ownership not only of the physical machinery of production but also of "the general intellect". And this is more than just the breaking-down of the walls of commercial secrecy, patent, copyright, and commercial sponsorship of research which keep knowledge parcelled today.

Exactly what it means positively is not clear. Sometimes Marx seems to think in terms of a future society where everyone will have at least a sound acquaintance with every field of knowledge.

That might just have been possible in the mid 19th century, for a prodigy of industriousness, curiosity, and mental retentiveness such as Engels. Science has expanded too far for it to be possible today. Even the most able and hardest-working person today, faced as Engels was with writing articles at speed on random topics for the *New American Cyclopaedia*,

would find himself or herself utterly, catastrophically ignorant on many of the items.

But an education for every person sufficient for them to orient themselves in the main areas of social life and of science? That might be possible. Indeed, it is necessary if in future human society is going to be able to make the decisions it needs to make about regulating its relations with its natural environment in a really rational and democratic way.

We are lamentably far from it today. The drive of capital for "the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labour" has made education into by far the biggest industry — measured by number of "workers", studying, teaching, or ancillary — in many capitalist countries. Sixteen years or so of full-time education, followed by extensive part-time learning, is not uncommon now, and in sheer

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quantity of time it should be sufficient to ensure a democratic participation in "the general intellect".

In practice, far from it. The generic inhospitability of capitalist society to such a democratic enterprise as general all-round education; the demoralisation generated by long-term unemployment or semi-employment; the mental damage of the insecurities and inequalities of life under neo-liberalism; the "shouting-down" of education by the louder voices of commercial TV and other media; and, paradoxically perhaps, the artificial separation of education from productive work carried out by adults (student-workers mostly being confined in industries which employ almost exclusively young workers) — all combine to make modern education systems tremendously inefficient.

A 1996 survey in Britain by the Office for National Statistics found that 39% of males and 52% of females aged between 16 and 24 (and a higher proportion of older people) had a lower level of literacy and numeracy than "the minimum level required to cope with modern life and work" on OECD reckonings.

This was not a matter of reading James Joyce or understanding quantum theory, but of the ability to "locate and use information in graphs, timetables and charts..."

The ideologists of capital have few answers to this other than to demand "more testing", "a return to traditional methods", and tougher command by "super-heads".

The left must cease to consider education as a marginal sector of society, to be attended to chiefly when teachers campaign for higher wages, students protest at higher fees, or schools complain of reduced budgets. We need a more revolutionary programme than higher wages for teachers, zero fees for students, and bigger budgets for schools.

Our work, as socialists, cannot be just to react against particular capitalist policies, or even against capitalism itself.

"As the system of bourgeois economy has developed for us by degrees, so too its negation, which its ultimate result", writes Marx.

And he expounds this revolutionary "negation", which is not merely a "negation" but also an "ultimate result", as the expansion above all of cultured, educated, social human free time.

*The saving of labour time [is] equal to an increase of free time, i.e. time for the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labour as itself the greatest productive power. From the standpoint of the direct production process it can be regarded as the production of fixed capital, this fixed capital being man himself. It goes without saying, by the way, that direct labour time itself cannot remain in the abstract antithesis to free time in which it appears from the perspective of bourgeois economy.*

*Labour cannot become play, as [the utopian socialist] Fourier would like, although it remains his great contribution to have expressed the suspension not of distribution, but of the mode of production itself, in a higher form, as the ultimate object. Free time — which is both idle time and time for higher activity — has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the direct production process as this different subject. This process is then both discipline, as regards the human being in the process of becoming; and, at the same time, practice [Ausbübung], experimental science, materially creative and objectifying science, as regards the human being who has become, in whose head exists the accumulated knowledge of society..." [p.711-2]*

tions" from that concept to others (labour, landed property) in the style of Hegel, attracted most attention at the time. Nicolaus shared that emphasis on the "Hegelian" character of the *Grundrisse*.

It led E P Thompson, in *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) to identify the *Grundrisse* as the root of recurrent tendencies in Marxism to construct its theory as a "perfected" Hegelian-type system. This sort of Marxism, so Thompson argues, represents society as a tidily closed system, constructed as "capital posits conditions", one after the other, "in accordance with its immanent essence".

Actually — Thompson cites Engels here — economic concepts, including capital, "are subject to change and transformation" and no economic law "has any reality except as approximation, tendency..." "Nor", adds Thompson, has historical research "found any society which can be simply described as 'capital in the totality of its relations'."

This is not the place, nor am I a person qualified, to enter deep into the subject of the relation between Marx's thinking and Hegel's. It seems to me, though, that the *Grundrisse* is, on the contrary, the work where Marx most extensively establishes the working class as more than just the "dialectical negation" of capital.

"Hegelian" language in Marx's notebooks is not necessarily evidence of especially deep thinking. Marx, let us remember, had been drilled in "Hegelian" terminology and turns of phrase as a philosophy student today might be drilled in Wittgenstein, or an economics student in Arrow and Debreu.

It was the terminology that would come first to hand when constructing an argument. Its prevalence may, and I would suggest does, indicate passages where Marx is scribbling ideas down more sloppily or tiredly, relying more on stock, in contrast to those where he had got things clearer in his mind before putting pen to paper.

As Engels pointed out, the "dialectical transitions" by which Hegel loped from concept to concept were generally the weakest part of his work, "forced constructions" devised to

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complete a spuriously complete "system". Marx made similar scathing comments on those "transitions" in his 1843 notes on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

In the *Grundrisse* itself, Engels chided Marx gently, *I often followed the dialectical transitions only with difficulty... I am still not entirely clear on the dialectical transition from land-ownership to wage-labour... The abstract, dialectical tone of this resumé will naturally disappear in the complete work...* Or certainly, Karl, it should! So Engels hinted (letter of 9 April 1858).

The *Grundrisse* contains a passage (pages 271 to 281) in which Marx starts from the concept of capital, attempts to demonstrate that "the only use-value which can form the opposite pole to capital is labour", then tries to establish dialectical transitions between both those concepts and landed property.

It is the most "Hegelian-system-like" section of the *Grundrisse*; and it is *wrong*. It is corrected by Marx later in the *Grundrisse* itself. In later sections of the *Grundrisse*, Marx discovers, by more sober analysis, that "the use-value which forms the opposite pole to capital" is not in fact labour (as earlier economists thought, and Marx himself had assumed in his earlier thinking) but labour-power.

The *Grundrisse* is a series of notebooks, never readied for publication. It has sections which are obvious early drafts of arguments expressed more clearly and concisely in *Capital*; sections which are blind alleys in argument which Marx turned back from and never returned to; sections attempting to clarify issues by illustrative calculations which get lost in arithmetical errors; sections which are just Marx's jottings from long-forgotten economists with cursory comments. Many pages are given to discussions of capitalist crisis, all of them in my view very clumsy first drafts compared to the discussions in *Capital* volume 2 and in *Theories of Surplus Value*.

On the distinction between labour and labour-power; on why labour is the substance of value; and on why the exchange between capitalist and worker is simultaneously free commerce and exploitation, the "early draft" sections are often, though rougher and clumsier, fresher and more vivid than the terse finished formulations in *Capital*.

The most important passages in the *Grundrisse*, for today, are those where Marx takes up his telescope to look at the very long-term trends of capitalist development.

- More: <http://grundrisse.blogspot.com>
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Mass entertainment - P T Barnum's circus freaks

## 150 years

**D**ESPITE the *Grundrisse* being 150 years old, such ideas in it are, essentially, new for the left even today. The huge manuscript remained almost unknown for over a century.

One fragment, a draft introduction, was published by Kautsky in 1903. The whole text was published in Moscow in 1939-40, but ignored in the tumult of war. Only three or four copies reached the West.

A new edition (again, in the original German) was published in 1953, but again, little noticed. An English translation of excerpts on *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* was published by Eric Hobsbawm in 1964.

The *Grundrisse* became a live element in Marxist debates only in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Roger Dangeville's partial French translation came out in 1968; Martin Nicolaus published an English translation in 1973 and a widely-read article on "The Unknown Marx" as a "trailer" for it in 1968; David McLellan published a short selection of excerpts in 1971; Roman Rosdolsky's monumental study *The Making of Marx's Capital* appeared in German in 1968 and in English in 1977.

Crisis — the political crisis which shook the capitalist world in 1968, the first post-1945 world recession in 1969-71, and the jerkier slump of 1974-5 — had been the impulse pushing the text in front of the Marxist reading public.

Conditions of acute capitalist disarray and revolutionary triumphalism were, however, the least conducive to calm considerations of the insights to be got from "Marx's telescope".

Most of the discussion centred round two other elements of the *Grundrisse*: the very "Hegelian" language, and the concept of "capital in general" (as distinct from particular capitals).

Martin Nicolaus was a Maoist. Thus his introduction to his

translation of the *Grundrisse* babbled exultantly that capitalism was "now entering perhaps the greatest and last" of its "cataclysms". Already, to see Marx's idea of the "abolition of the individual as private proprietor, rise of the social individual" lived out in practice, "one has only to consider the youth of Vietnam and China".

Marx's emphatic rejections, in the *Grundrisse*, of romantic, ascetic, barracks-communist "anti-capitalism" went past Nicolaus unnoticed.

Today Nicolaus himself reports: "Having got thoroughly burned in the M-L sectarianism of the 70s [the Maoists always called themselves 'Marxist-Leninists'], I have had no political affiliations for 25 years, other than the occasional local cause or issue".

Not all of the 1970s' flurry of interest in the *Grundrisse* was useless, by any means. Roman Rosdolsky wrote in his preface: *I am, by profession, neither an economist nor a philosopher. I would not have dared to write a commentary on the Rough Draft if a school of Marxist theoreticians still existed today... However, the last generation of notable Marxist theoreticians for the most part fell victim to Hitler's and Stalin's terror... Given these circumstances I feel obliged to offer this work to the reading public... in the hope that a new generation will follow for whom, once more, Marx's theory will be a living source...*

We can only strive to live up to Rosdolsky's challenge. However, Rosdolsky, in his younger years active as a Trotskyist in the Ukraine, had been out of active politics since being put into a Nazi concentration camp in 1942. Dying at the age of 69 just months after he wrote his preface, he could take no part in the debate which followed his book.

Rosdolsky's book is a tremendous treasure-hoard of debates and concepts from the era of Marxist debate before the darkness of Stalinism.

Nevertheless, his large emphasis on Marx's deployment of the concept of "capital in general", and construction of "transi-

# The Grundrisse on exploitation

**W**HERE do profits come from? How can wage-labour reasonably be described as wage-slavery? If a worker makes a free contract, as an individual equal before the law, with an employer, isn't that a fair day's wage for a fair day's work?

Shouldn't the word "exploitation" be reserved for exceptional cases where workers are exceptionally at a disadvantage in the wage-bargain, rather being used (as Marxists use it) for all wage-labour?

The *Grundrisse* offers a faster-burning and more vivid first draft of the answers to these questions which Marx develops in *Capital*.

In *Capital*, Marx is laconic and deliberately "flat" about why it is labour that sustains capital.

*In order to be able to extract value from the consumption of a commodity, our friend, Moneybags, must be so lucky as to find, within the sphere of circulation, in the market, a commodity, whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption, therefore, is itself an embodiment of labour, and, consequently, a creation of value. The possessor of money does find on the market such a special commodity in capacity for labour or labour-power.* [Chapter 6].

It just so happens that way, and that's that.

In *Capital*, when Marx introduces the concept of surplus value (the common underpinning, in his theory, of capitalist revenue of all sorts), he starts by imagining that wages are equal to the amount of value added by a worker in a day. Impossible: there would be nothing for capital to feed on! A seemingly pedantic distinction resolves the conundrum. The value of labour-power (which underpins wages) is determined by the labour-time embodied in working-class subsistence, not by the labour done by the worker after the capitalist has bought the labour-power.

*The owner of the money has paid the value of a day's labour-power; his, therefore, is the use of it for a day; a day's labour belongs to him. The circumstance, that on the one hand the daily sustenance of labour-power costs only half a day's labour, while on the other hand the very same labour-power can work during a whole day, that consequently the value which its use during one day creates, is double what he pays for that use, this circumstance is, without doubt, a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injury to the seller.* [Chapter 7]

"By no means an injury to the seller!" Only over hundreds of pages, in *Capital*, does Marx build up the picture which shows that the market criterion, "by no means an injury to the seller", is only a half, or quarter, or one-tenth truth. In *Capital*, Marx does not use the words "exploit" or "exploitation" until chapter 11. Even there, those words are mostly used in a fairly neutral way.

In *Capital* Marx chose a deliberately toned-down, give-your-opponents-their-strongest-argument approach. Compare the *Grundrisse*.

*The exchange between capital and labour... splits into two processes which are not only formally but also qualitatively different, and even contradictory:*

(1) *The worker sells his commodity... for a specific sum of money... (2) The capitalist obtains labour itself... the productive force... which thereby becomes... a force belonging to capital itself...*

*Instead of aiming their amazement in this direction — and considering the worker to owe a debt to capital for the fact that he is alive at all, and can repeat certain life processes every day as soon as he has eaten and slept enough — these whitewashing sycophants of bourgeois economics should rather have fixed their attention on the fact that, after constantly repeated labour, he always has only his living, direct labour itself to exchange...*

*The worker cannot become rich in this exchange, since, in exchange for his labour capacity as a fixed, available magnitude, he surrenders its creative power, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage. Rather, he necessarily impoverishes himself... because the creative power of his labour establishes itself as the power of capital, as an alien power confronting him. He divests himself of labour as the force productive of wealth; capital appropriates it, as such...*

*The productivity of his labour, his labour in general, in so far as it is not a capacity but a motion, real labour, comes to confront the worker as an alien power; capital, inversely, realizes itself through the appropriation of alien labour.*

*The worker emerges not only not richer, but emerges rather poorer from the process than he entered. For not only has he produced the conditions of necessary labour as conditions belonging to capital; but also the value-creating possibility, the realisation which lies as a possibility within him, now likewise exists as surplus value, surplus product, in a word as capital, as master over living labour capacity, as value endowed with its own*

*might and will, confronting him in his abstract, objectless, purely subjective poverty. He has produced not only the alien wealth and his own poverty, but also the relation of this wealth as independent, self-sufficient wealth, relative to himself as the poverty which this wealth consumes, and from which wealth thereby draws new vital spirits into itself, and realizes itself anew.*

*After production, [labour capacity] has become poorer by the life forces expended, but otherwise begins the drudgery anew...*

In the earlier parts of the *Grundrisse*, Marx follows other economists in calling what the capitalists buy from the workers "labour". In the very course of writing the *Grundrisse*, he realised that was wrong. The worker sells not labour but labour-power, or the capacity to labour.

The best-known explanation of this distinction between labour and labour-power is Engels' introduction to a later edition of *Wage Labour and Capital*. Engels' introduction is deliberately "flat", in the same way that Marx's exposition in the early chapter of *Capital* is. In the *Grundrisse*, we see the distinction dawning on Marx; and it is not

## The worker sells not labour but labour-power, or the capacity to labour. It is not merely a distinction, it is a conflict. The distinction between labour-power and labour is not just a logical distinction, but a social process of separation, a question of social power.

merely a distinction, it is a conflict.

*Living labour itself appears as alien vis-a-vis living labour capacity, whose labour it is, whose own life's expression it is, for it has been surrendered to capital... Labour capacity relates to its labour as an alien... Just as the worker relates to the product of his labour as an alien thing, so does he relate to... his own labour as an expression of his life, which, although it belongs to him, is alien to him and coerced from him... Capital is the existence of social labour.*

The distinction between labour-power and labour is not just a logical distinction, but a social process of separation, a question of social power. Marx was to explain further in *Theories Of Surplus Value*:

*Instead of labour, Ricardo should have discussed labour-power. But had he done so, capital would also have been revealed as the material conditions of labour, confronting the labourer as power that had acquired an independent existence, and capital would at once have been revealed as a definite social relationship.*

The explanations in the *Grundrisse* are all the more powerful because here — in contrast to some of his earlier writings, and more sharply than in any other of his later writings — Marx stresses that "the workers themselves... will not permit [wages] to be reduced to the absolute minimum; on the contrary, they achieve a certain quantitative participation in the general growth of wealth".

That they do so is politically important: it is what makes wage-workers within capitalism able to get "a share of civilization which distinguishes [them] from the slave" — such as "participation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the agitation for his own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures, educating his children, developing his taste etc".

The formal equality which the wage-worker achieves in capitalist society is important, too: it "essentially modifies his relation by comparison to that of workers in other social modes of production".

The evil is one not to be remedied by higher wages, or more complete formal equality.

Thus Marx's comment, some years later, on a clause in the German socialists' Gotha Programme which said that the problem with wage-labour was an "iron law" keeping wages too low:

*It is as if, among slaves who have at last got behind the secret of slavery and broken out in rebellion, a slave still in thrall to obsolete notions were to inscribe on the program of the rebellion: Slavery must be abolished because the feeding of slaves in the system of slavery cannot exceed a certain low maximum!*

Of course slaves generally did not get enough food. Of course slave revolts were good even if limited to demanding bigger food rations. Of course it is inherent in the system of capitalist wage-labour that wages are squeezed down. Of course it is important that workers struggle to get even a little bit more. But Marx developed his theory so as to encourage workers to rebel against wage-labour as a whole, not just against low wages, just as, in their time, slaves had eventually rebelled against slavery as such, and not just against small food rations.

The same thought is expressed in the *Grundrisse*: *The recognition of the products as [labour-power's] own, and the judgement that its separation from the conditions of its realisation is improper — forcibly imposed — is an enormous advance in awareness, itself the product of the mode of production resting on capital, as much the knell to its doom as, with the slave's awareness that he cannot be the property of another, with his consciousness of himself as a person... slavery... ceases to be able to prevail as the basis of production.*